

[Pack on my back]

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Pack on my Back.

by

Hilda Polacheck.

American Folk Stuff

Narrated by Mr. Hyman Bernstein,

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How did I happen to become a peddler? Well, I'll tell you. I came to New York in 1870. The boat docked early in the morning. Two hours later another man and I started to look for jobs. In the evening we came back to our rooming house. He had found a job in a clothing factory. I did not find a job. So my landlady said that I should peddle matches. I peddled as long as I had to earn a living.

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(Here was a promising start to a tale of frontier commerce by a true old timer. His story grew out of a conversation about the present day refugee problem; our narrator started by telling how he came to the United States:)

To begin with I left Russia and went to Liverpool, England. I got there early in the morning. I found my way to the dock. I was told that the boat for America would leave in the evening. I wanted to see Liverpool, but I was afraid I would get lost. So I sat down on my suit case and waited for the boat to leave. As I was sitting there a young man, about my age, came up to me and said:

“Are you going to America?”

I said yes.

“Maybe you can take me along?” he asked me.

'Have you a ticket?' I asked.

“No”, he said.

'Have you any money', I asked.

“I have one pound”, he said. “I will give it to you if you will let me carry your suit case. If I carry a suit case 2 it will look like I am going to America. And if you are stopped because you have no suit case, you can show your ticket.”

I didn't like such business. But then I was sorry for him; he wanted to go to America as much as I did. So I let him carry my suit case. But I didn't take his money.

We went into the boat. He put the suit case down near me and went down to the lower deck. Before the boat left, everybody had to get in line and show the tickets. Half of the

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ticket was taken. The other half was to be taken when the boat got to New York. After the boat had left the shore, the man without the ticket came up to me.

“When you go in to eat, bring me a piece of bread,” he said.

Well, I could not let the man starve. I had brought some sausage and cheese from home. I did not eat the food on the boat. It was not kosher. While I was sitting at the table, I put a couple of pieces of bread in my pocket. I gave them to the man with a piece of my sausage. I did this at every meal. But I was worried. That would the man do without a ticket when the boat got to New York? Somebody said in two days we would be in New York. I could not sleep. That night I told the story to the man who slept in the berth above me.

“I’ll tell you what we’ll do,” said the man. “Yesterday I talked to a Jewish man who is an American. He travels 3 between England and America very often. He told me he always goes on this boat. Maybe he knows the captain and maybe he will ask the capatain to fix it.”

In the morning we looked for the American. We told him our story. He said he would talk to the captain. In a couple of hours he came balk.

“Your friend is lucky,” said the American. “The captain said that if the boat was going back to England, he would have to take the man back. But the boat is going to Australia. So when the boat gets to New York, he can leave the boat the same as the people who had tickets.”

When the boat docked in New York, we all got off. No one asked any questions. There was no monkey business. No one asked how much money we had. There was doctor to see if we were sick or well. Nobody cared what we did. It is different today.

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A crowd of people met the boat. They were mostly relatives of the people who came over. I had nobody. The man who slept above me on the boat was met by an uncle. He asked me where I was going. I said I did not know. So he took me and the man who had no ticket along with him. When we came to his house he told us to go next door. There the woman would take us as roomers. The woman and her husband and eight children were living in two rooms. She was a nice woman. She said she could rent us two cots on the roof.

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'And what happens when it rains?' I asked.

"Oh, you can come down and sit in the kitchen," she said. "Four children sleep in the kitchen. They sleep very good. They will not wake up."

"Let's try it," said the man who was with me. We rented the two cots on the roof.

Well, I started peddling. I peddled matches in New York one year. I saved up one hundred dollars. I was looking around to see where I could make more money. I had an uncle in Chicago. So I wrote him a letter and asked him if I could make more money in Chicago. He wrote me a very nice letter. He said that I could make more money if I peddled dry goods in the country. Well, I wanted to see my uncle and aunt. I wanted to see Chicago. So I sold my basket and I went to Chicago.

(Someone asked what year that was.)

I came to Chicago in June 1871. The day after I arrived I started peddling. My uncle and aunt lived on Fourth Avenue at that time. (Wabash Avenue today) They had three rooms. One room was rented to two roomers. I shared the room with them. I lived there when the great fire broke out! Yes, I remember the fire. The nights were getting chilly. The family used to go to bed early to save coal. We were all going to bed, when we heard the fire bells.

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'Do you want to see where the fire is?' I asked the two roomers.

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"As long as our house is not on fire, I don't care," one of the men said. "Why should I bother about a fire?"

But I wanted to see the fire. So I went out into the street. I saw big flames across the river. Well, I thought, the river is between the house and fire, so why should I worry? I went into the house and got into bed.

The next thing I knew the two men were shaking me trying to wake me.

"Get up!" they said, "The whole city is on fire! Save your things! We are going to Lincoln Park!"

I jumped out of bed and pulled on my pants. Everybody in the house was trying to save as much as they could. I tied my clothes in a sheet. With this bundle on one shoulder and my pack of goods on the other I left the house. Everybody was running north. Then I came to Lake Street, I saw all the wagons of Marshall Field lined up in front of the place of business. (The firm was then called Field, Leiter and Company.) Men and boys were carrying the goods out of the building and loading everything into the wagons. The goods were taken to the car barns at State and Twentieth Street. A few days later, Marshall Field started doing business in the car barn. I remember buying some things before I started peddling.

Everybody was talking about the fire. Everybody had [a?] different story as to how the fire started. I am sure Mrs. O'Leary's cow started the fire. I was talking to a man who lived next door to Mrs. O'Leary and he told me. There were all kinds of songs about the fire. Years after the fire, people were still singing songs about it. You remember the song "Hot Time in the Old Town?" Well, there was a song written to that tune. These are the words:

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“One moonlight night when the families were in bed, Mrs. O’Leary took a lantern to the shed, The cow kicked it over winked her eye and said: There’ll be a hot time in the old town tonight, my baby.”

The house where I lived was burned down. I took my pack and started walking to the country. I had pins, needles, thread, safety pins, knitting needles and yarn, hat pins, cotton and woolen cloth, underwear and stockings for the whole family. Yes, I carried a department store on my back. I walked from farm to farm. There was no rural mail delivery in those days. Months would pass without without a newspaper. The farmers were hungry for news. Everybody wanted to know about the fire. T would sell my goods and bring news at the same time. Most of the time it would take all day to walk from one farm to another. The farms were fifteen, twenty, and thirty miles apart. But I always made a good day’s profit at each farm house. The farmer’s wife always gave me something to eat, and a place to sleep. I still did not eat anything that was not kosher. There were plenty of fresh eggs, bread and butter, and milk. In the summer I would eat fruit from the trees. I got along.

I walked through Illinois, Indiana, Iowa and some of the 7 southern states with my pack. I never worked on my Sabbath. I never worked on the farmer’s Sabbath. The farmers always respected my religion and I respected his. You see I had a five day week long before the unions.

The farmers and their wives were always very kind to everybody. Their lives were longly and they were glad when anybody came along. Often the good farmers were fooled by crooks. These crooks would play tricks on the farmers. I was staying at a farm house one Saturday, when a horse and buggy drove into the yard. Two men got out of the buggy and came into the kitchen. No one knocked on doors in those days. There were no door bells.

One man was well dressed. The other one looked like a hired man. The man with the good clothes said he was “Doctor O’Brien.” The other one was the driver. The “Doctor” wanted to know if he and the driver could get some dinner. They would pay any price.

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The "Doctor" wanted some fried chicken. He said he had not eaten fried spring chicken for a long time. So the farmer's wife said she would fix dinner for them. She went out to the yard and caught two fine spring chickens. She fixed them all up and started to fry them. While the woman was cooking the potatoes and the vegetables, the "Doctor" went out to the yard. As soon as he was out of the kitchen, the driver told the woman that she should be careful when the "Doctor" paid for the dinners because he had counterfeit money. Well, the woman put the dinner on the table. She had 8 preserves and jellies. She had not biscuits and a big cake. When the dinner was ready, the driver called the "Doctor". The two sat down and ate everything on the table. I never saw two men eat so much. After they each had three cups of coffee, the "Doctor" took out a big wallet and gave the woman ten dollars and asked for the change.

Well, the woman thought the money was counterfeit, so she said she had no change. The "Doctor" then said that he was driving to town, and he would leave the money at the general store if that was satisfactory. (He used big words like that) The farmer's wife said it was all right and the two men left. Of course there was no money left at the general store. For months after this, every farm house that I came to, I heard the story of "Doctor O'Brien". A couple of months later a farmer had him arrested for carrying counterfeit money. But his money was good. That was just a trick to get free meals.

I walked about with the pack on my back for two years. Then I bought a horse and wagon. Things were easier then. The next time I went to Chicago to buy goods, my uncle thought I should get married. Well, he introduced me to a girl, and the minute I saw her, I agreed with him. On my next trip to Chicago we were married. We furnished three rooms and a week later I went back to my peddling. Yes, rain or shine, hot or cold, I drove about in my covered wagon selling things that the farmers needed. I drove through the south. I drove 9 through all the midwest states. During the fifty years that I carried a department store on my back and in my wagon, I made many friends.

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One cold winter night I came to a farm house. I had not eaten since morning. I had been driving all day. When I walked into the house, the farmer said that God must have sent me. The farmer's wife was ready to have a baby. He did not want to leave her. Would I drive ten miles to fetch a midwife? I forgot I was hungry. I told the farmer to feed my horse and put him in the stable. We hitched a horse to the farmer's buggy and I started off. We came back in time. The rest of the night the farmer and I kept the stove going and heating water. When daylight began to show in the sky, we heard the baby crying. I could not help thinking that I was not home when my first son was born.

Business was good on that trip. I sold sheets and pillow cases. The farmer bought all the blankets I had. He was so happy that he bought all the baby things in my stock.

The farmers in those days had plenty of money. Before the civil war they used to get eight cents a bushel for wheat. Then when the war broke out, the government paid them a dollar and a quarter a bushel. They had saved their money and they had plenty of it.

While I traveled about the country, my wife was raising a fine family in Chicago. I would see my children when I got home for the Jewish holidays. I used to stay home for a week 10 and then back again to the road. It was not an easy life. But I knew no other way of earning a living. I made the best of it.

Yes, the peddlers with packs on their backs served [the?] the lonely people on the farms. They made Marshall Field rich. The country peddler was put out of business by the mail order house. The mail order house is being put out of business by the automobile. And that's the way it goes.